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ABSTRACT

A self-organizing school, defined as one engaging in a continuous process in which staff assume authority and responsibility for the resources of the school, is described in this paper. The staff work together to organize learning activity around the needs and interests of each learner. The following requisite conditions are listed to accomplish this transformation: (1) a formal action by the governing body; (2) a school-level project to support change; and (3) a leadership team to provide school-level structure. To implement this transformation, a four-step process is outlined that includes assessment and analysis, problem-finding and goal-setting, planning and implementation, and evaluation and reporting. These steps are explained in detail and the resources available at each school to help in this task are identified. Resources are appended. (LMS)

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GROWING INTO SCHOOLS OF THE FUTURE

a description of the requisite conditions
and a process for the development
of self-organizing schools

from the collaborative work of
Nancy Lee and Gary Obermeyer

NEA NATIONAL CONFERENCE
Achieving Effective Schools:
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Learning Options
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> "Within the context of a limited set of clear goals for students set by state and local policy-makers, teachers, working together, must be free to exersize their professional judgement as to the best way to achieve these goals. This means the ability to make - or at least to strongly influence - decisions concerning such things as the materials and instructional methods to be used, the staffing structure to be employed, the organization of the school day, the assignment of students, the consultants to be used and the allocation of resources available to the school."
>
> Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, 1986.

The above quote typifies a growing consensus in the current school reform debate. Policy-makers are ready to grant more latitude for decision-making at the school level in return for results.

The vision described in the Carnegie Forum report implies support for fundamental structural change of schools. We believe that school staffs have an unprecedented opportunity to establish formal processes for school-based change and to transform schools from externally-structured organizations to self-organizing systems.

Our concept of a self-organizing school is focused on the functions of the school staff. Self-organizing is a continuous process in which staff assumes authority and responsibility for the resources of the school and works together to organize learning activity around the needs and interests of each learner.

We describe the requisite conditions for this transformation to help school staff capitalize on the opportunity which exists in the current climate of school reform.

The conditions for school transformation are embodied in our definition of **school-based change:**

> **formal approaches to school change**
> **which establish a structure at the school level**
> **for collaborative problem-solving**
> **in support of learning.**

A FORMAL ACTION by the governing body provides organizational support for the change work:

- o authorizing and legitimizing the new structure.
- o providing a focus or mission for the work.
- o clarifying expectations.
- o providing resources. (money and time)

School staff will need assurance that they will not bear the costs of change. The work of redesigning instructional program should be considered as part of the job and the costs of retraining for changing responsibilities should be built into the budget.

Parents and policy-makers will need assurance that change is not simply change for the sake of change and that an integral part of the process is a relating of change to the mission and goals of the school.

A SCHOOL-LEVEL project involves, at its maximum, the organizational unit housed within one school building.

- o Each school is a unique social unit with its own environmental context, culture, norms, and resources.
- o Performance and innovation are enhanced when greater autonomy is granted to work units within the organization.
- o A school-based project provides resources to support change relevant to the people in that environment.

The focal point of the SCHOOL-LEVEL STRUCTURE is the leadership team or steering committee.

The effectiveness of a core staff leadership group depends on the level of confidence and rapport they can develop and maintain. They should be selected by the staff and include the building principal and liaisons from central office and from the community.

COLLABORATION as defined by Appley and Winder(1977) describes what should be the norm in schools:

> **"...individuals in a group share mutual aspirations and common conceptual framework;**
> ...these aspirations and conceptualizations are characterized by each individual's consciousness of his or her motives toward the other; by caring or concern for the other; and by commitment to work with the other over time provided that this commitment is a matter of choice."

The bureaucratic structure and the cellular organization of schools makes collaboration difficult without a deliberate effort to change. The establishment of leadership teams, work groups and task forces provides a means to put collaborative processes at the heart of the school change effort.

PROBLEM-SOLVING is the critical activity in school change. The aim is to think beyond books, buildings and schedules to the learning process itself.

- Initial activity tends to focus on such issues and concerns as facilities and discipline.
- Each experience develops self-confidence and skills necessary for handling more complex problems.
- There is a natural growth toward matters which are more central to the function and structure of the school.
- Incrementally, instructional decisions preceed all others and organizational form follows function.

SUPPORT FOR LEARNING is the bottom line.

Developments in learning theory and understanding of the nature of human intelligence present and expanding array of possibilities for designing learning activity to fit the needs of each learner. Developments in communications and informations processing technology present an exploding range of possibilities for managing personalized learning programs. School staff has the means, through a formal school-based process, to give thoughtful consideration to the possibilities.

The model we advocate is a basic problem solving model similar in form to that which can be found in any school-based improvement project. However, it is a very open model intended for the staff to adapt to the conditions and resources of their respective schools. There are four components:

THE PROCESS OF TRANSFORMATION
- --- **ASSESSMENT AND ANALYSIS**
- --- **PROBLEM-FINDING AND GOAL-SETTING**
- --- **PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION**
- --- **EVALUATION AND REPORTING**

Each component is designed to move from individual points of view toward a shared view. All components are interactive and can run concurrently. Each has transformative potential.

ASSESSMENT AND ANALYSIS

Purpose: To provide an inventory and reference point for school improvement work.

Approach: The site administrator(s) works with certified and classified staff to develop awareness and understanding of community expectations and resources. Individual members and staff groups generate multiple assessments, both quantitative and qualitative, of student attitudes and performance. The entire staff develops a composite analysis of the data to produce a profile of community and students.

Potential: The assessment process will move the school "closer to the customer" (Peters and Waterman,1982), use what the staff knows from working with students and begin to reduce the isolation of the cellular organization. (Lortie,1975)

PROBLEM-FINDING AND GOAL-SETTING

Purpose: To identify impediments to effectiveness and to set priorities for improvement.

Approach: Individual staff members and staff groups identify areas of need. The entire staff works through a process to understand the various needs and set priorities for improvement. The site administrator(s) support and facilitate the process.

Potential: Discussion and consensus on problems will build commitment to common goals and further reduce isolation. Problem-finding will give participants a constructive outlet for the frustrations that might ordinarily lead to blaming behavior.

PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION

Purpose: To develop, test, and implement alternative designs and approaches to instruction.

Approach: Individual staff members and staff groups develop and/or select solutions to address the priorities set by the total staff. Changes which require support and/or change from others are judged in terms of the shared goals. Participation in this phase is voluntary.

Potential: The role of staff will change from consuming to initiating innovation. (House, 1974)

School transformation will occur naturally when the school staff has the means to take a critical view of the school as an integral part of the work day and the authority to make instructional decisions.

With the development of communications technology, the gap between theory and practice and the distance between individual schools will disappear. Interaction around a shared knowledge base will provide the nucleus for self-organizing schools.

With shared goals, experimentation will flourish and a wider range of learning activity can be supported. Learners will have choices within the school, not just between schools.

EVALUATION AND REPORTING

Purpose: To judge the degree of success, to provide a basis for further change, and to gain support for change.

Approach: Staff measures the results against the goals and objectives of the original design, and uses the results to learn what worked and what did not work. The site administrator(s) evaluates the evaluation processes.

Potential: Meaningful data about learning will help schools get out of the test-score trap. The reporting of results from change efforts will provide a means to enlist additional support from constituents.

Resources already exist which school staff can employ to transform the school. These are examples:

- Staff development resources can be used to 1) develop understanding of the potential in the change process, 2) develop skills needed for the problem-solving activity and 3) address the retraining needs identified through the planning process.

- The structure and process of school change work are appropriate topics for bargaining since they affect working conditions. The bargaining process helps clarify expectations and the contract provides a certain formality. For locals without a history of bargaining bilateral communication about school change may be the best available avenue for mutual agreement.

- A shift of decision-making authority will focus attention on the interpersonal relations of the staff. There will be needs to communicate about the implications of change, resolve conflict, clarify expectations, and agree on terms and conditions under which to act. Most of NEA's state affiliates and many local affiliates have training programs and trainers who can help.

- There are increasing numbers of data bases on educational research. The NEA Mastery in Learning Project is developing one such system, called TRaK, which will give school staff ready access to current research and classroom tested materials on learning and teaching. As TRaK and other such resources are automated and installed in electronic data bases, school staff will have direct and easy access to the information. Most schools already have at least one person with the skills and interests to connect the staff with this resource.

CONCLUSION

School staff engaged in problem-solving at the school level will also be reshaping resources far beyond the school.

Statements from groups like the Carnegie Forum and support from policy-makers will help, but it is the collaborative action of each staff which will make the difference in creating the self-organizing school.

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